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Letters

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Letters

Abstract

Letters to Jack Johnson from Robert Delaney

Robert Delaney, who later changed his name to Bob Smith, is one of the early documented US born Black pugilists

Keywords

poetry, letters, race, fighting



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Letters

by Derrick Harriell

Letters to Jack Johnson from Robert Delaney

Robert Delaney, who later changed his name to Bob Smith, is one of the early documented US born Black pugilists

From Sea October 1855

Jack,

I learned early on my fists had always been free
to roam, you will learn this too.

As a child I collapsed young Negro boys,
watched their spirits buckle
like oysters being canned or sold.

Liverpool 1862

Jack,

I am keeper of the beast.

Left the States for shores.

Left those Baltimore roads
my vagrant father once stumbled down.

Manchester's a sight for Negro eyes.

Black sailors scatter through crowded streets
in search of women and sport.

Just yesterday I saw an English woman

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holding a Negro's hand as if they were in love.

It was Liverpool that offered love for me Jack.

Here, I settled a gambling debt
by pushing a man's nose into his face.

Point of Ayr,

Wales, September 15th 1863

Jack,

Today I fight a giant whose snarls
have sent men to their mothers
without a shot being thrown.
I have not invited fear
despite the circus in my knees
and desert in my mouth.
Fifty pounds is enough to change things.
The Gods have sent rain and hail,
an omen perhaps. Round three begins
with Harry swinging hell into my chin
and for a moment I forget where the hell I am.
Jack, if Hell is anything like this ring,
do not be afraid.
There are no chains inside here,
and Satan's chin is sometimes glass.

Jack Johnson writes Robert Delaney

Galveston, Texas 1888

Robert,

This morning mamma told me of a Negro,
arms large as iron cannonballs,
hammer heads for hands.
Said an honest man would always best machines
and being strong was more godly
than tricking folks.
John Henry's bout with a steam hammer ended
with that hammer in tears.
Ever heard this one Robert?
Mamma then lift my shirt,
told me firm up, act strong,
poked my chest, squeezed my arms,
and through a muddy grin said
Baby, u gon' be stronger than that man
I' been tellin' you bout.

Los Angeles, CA

February 3rd, 1903

Robert,

It took twenty rounds, a little blood
to get rid of Denver Ed.

That hardheaded Negro kept punching back
even after I told him stay down.

I never cared much bout no colored belt,
this America,

and even white boys climb into frocks
one arm at a time.

Sydney, Australia

December 26th, 1908

Robert,

Bust up Burns in fourteen rounds.

I've never seen no Negro lynched
but understand the mercy their eyes beg for.

Damn mercy,
that mob in Springfield hung that barber
showed no pity, paraded his charred body for blocks,
wanted to show they ain't messin round.

Robert, should beating a man
in front of his wife and kids feel this good?

I don't feel like just no fighter.

When they said I was champion of all the world,
I didn't feel like just no champion.

Derrick Harriell was born in Milwaukee Wisconsin. He holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Chicago State University and is currently a dissertator in UW-Milwaukee's English PhD program where he also teaches Creative Writing. A 2009 Pushcart Nominee, Harriell's poems have appeared in various literary journals and anthologies, including The Cream City Review, Reverie, the Lamplighter Review, and is forthcoming in Main Street Rag. Cotton (Aquarius Press-Willow Books 2010) is his first collection of poems.

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